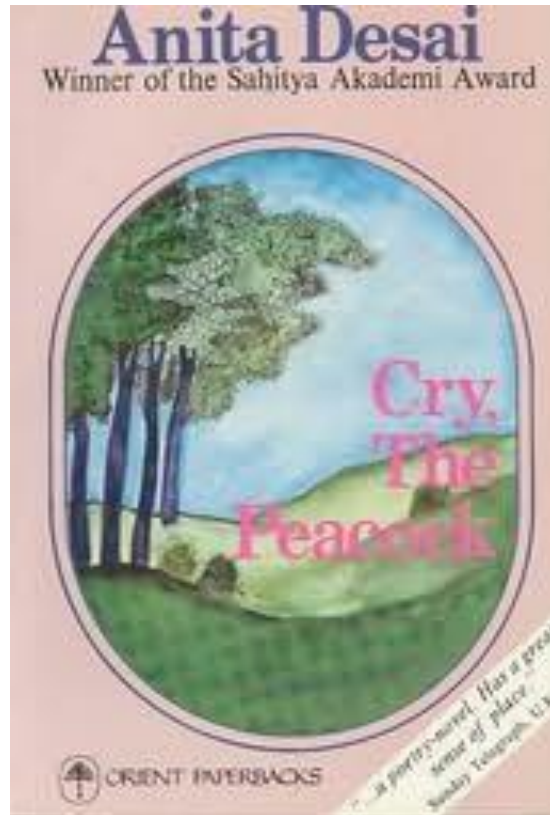


The Theme of Alienation in Anita Desai's Novel, *Cry, the Peacock*

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Abstract

Anita Desai is one of the few feminist voices in the Indian literary firmament who carved a niche for herself. She has made a landmark contribution by the flair of her creativity and imagination to remain an inspiration to the subsequent generations of women writers. She is vociferous against the wrongs done to her gender, through her works. Only very few writers like Kamala Markandeya, Nayanthara Seghal and others have portrayed 'woman' in such glorious uncertainties in their works. Desai's primary concern as a novelist is with the sequestered individual living in an abandoned limbo of personal privation. She projects the psycho emotional and socio psychic states of protagonists living in an alien and cloistered world of existential problems and passions. Desai herself has disclosed in an interview that her concern revolves

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:5 May 2017

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around the 'solitary and individual beings'. Her fictional world portrays alienated characters who find it difficult to come to terms with reality. Writer Desai is not far from her fictional world as her novels are purely subjective. Her protagonists are women who find themselves caught in the web of social, economic, cultural and political crises. Anita Desai has been categorically hailed as a 'feminist writer' by several critics, although she never missed an opportunity to deny it. But analyses of her novels in the light of feminist ideology prove that her critics are right. *Cry the Peacock* stands tall in that order.

Keywords: *Cry, the Peacock*, alienated women, hysterical minds, horoscope predictions, mental agony, Indian women, psychological alienation

Cry, the Peacock

Anita Desai's first novel *Cry, the Peacock* reveals the inner realities and psychic reverberations in the minds of her characters. In this novel Desai explores the hysterical mind of an Indian housewife, Maya. Her novel faithfully captures the contemporary Indian reality, especially the domestic life. The novel is an attempt to account the turbulent, emotional world of the neurotic protagonist, Maya who is married to Gautama. Maya is portrayed as a spoilt and pampered daughter of a wealthy Brahmin. The pre-marital freedom she enjoyed in her father's house puts her utterly defenceless when she counters a different code of conduct in her father-in-law's house. Moreover she is portrayed as a woman constantly haunted by the predictions of the horoscope which adds more woes to her married life.

The Albino Prophecy

Albino prophecy has predicted that either of the couple will die after four years of married life. She desperately needs someone to take her away from the dark shadow that lingers in her mind. Her husband who is supposed to give solace invigorates it instead. Her preoccupation with death is so strong that she contemplates the chances of her death as well as that of her husband Gautama. When the couple were watching the moon Maya feels that it is her husband who will die, as he accidentally comes between her and the moon. Such was her belief in the horoscope predicted by the astrologer. Desai explores the inner shores of Maya's world, an

unfeeling world and the resultant mental agony and presents to the world as an example of Indian Women.

The Theme of Isolation in the Novel

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Desai aims at tracing the theme of physical isolation and psychological alienation, a sort of estrangement from someone or something with which she or he is attached or identified - family, friends, society and even one's own self. In this novel it is the mental estrangement rather than physical sufferings of the characters that come to the front. Desai depicts the inner struggle of the Maya, the heroine of the novel whose neurotic condition is brought about by a variety of factors such as marital discord, barrenness and psychic disorder. In Desai's words she is an ideal example of her characters who are not normal human beings, but have been driven into some extremity of despair and are found wanting when coping with the normal living standards of society.

Maya

Maya is portrayed as an emotional character who is over sensitive in mental proclivities but affectionate in nature. Her expectations of a caring soul who could sympathize commensurably with her sensibilities were not fulfilled by her husband Gautama. He never cared to understand her sentiments and becomes the reason for all the tragedies. For instance, when Maya's pet dog Toto was dead Maya was totally shaken, but Gautama never tried to console her. He was preoccupied with the problem of the disposal of the carcass. After the death of her dog, Maya started interpreting every object she sees in terms of death.

Death lurked in those spaces, the darkness spoke of distance, separation, loneliness - loneliness of such proportion that it broke the bounds of that single world and all its associations, and went spilling and spreading out and about, lapping the stars, each one isolated from the other by so much. And the longer I gazed, the farther they retreated, till there was only the darkness hanging, like a moist shroud, over our heads. (24)

Similarly even a casual scene of people lying down on the streets reminds her of death. What pains Maya most is not her loneliness, but the thought that there is no one to share her

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feelings hurts her. What she gained from her married life is nothing, but the ossification of her senses of this otherness in discharging her role as a childless wife. Gautama's age and attitude make her a much disappointed woman. Desai takes that extra yard to portray the disillusionment of her heroine.

Intellectual and Spiritual Repose

Loneliness that produces anguish in Maya provides intellectual and spiritual repose to Gautama. Driven by loneliness Maya reverts back to childhood memories to escape the present. But her neurotic sensibility makes her hysterically aware of the past. The vision of the lime trees, her pet dog Toto remind her of her hallucinatory world. The aristocratic life style of her father hampers Maya's freedom of growing as an individual. As a grown up woman now, she cannot relate herself to the realities of married life. Her husband Gautama is not a suitable substitute of her father. Maya the domestic outcast and alien house wife wants from her husband Love and Passion, but what she gets is logic and philosophy.

The Symbols Signify Isolation

Anita Desai's prime intention of writing novels is not to deal with the plot and the story, instead to explore the inner recesses of the characters to demonstrate the causes of their strange behaviour. The novel is a rich reservoir of symbols giving plural meanings. Desai uses symbols to penetrate into the chaotic world of Maya and explores her psychic state caused by her morbid preoccupation with death and records them with a subtle realism. Symbols drawn from human life and nature, both past and present are effectively utilised to show the cause of Maya's anguish, despair, paranoia and the tragic end. The names of the major characters in the novel signify a philosophical world view. The name Gautama itself signifies Buddha who remained disinterested in the material world and who advocated human beings to give up desire to come out of the illusion (Maya).

Anita Desai uses the bird 'Peacock' as a symbol throughout the novel not without reason. Peacock is the only bird that could sense oncoming death beforehand. Since Maya has been portrayed as a character preoccupied with death from childhood days, it becomes easy for Desai to relate her to the bird peacock. Both the bird and the girl now have the knowledge of their

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impending death beforehand. The peacocks know that death is the ultimate reality and that when it rains they will die. They gaze at the approaching cloud as the approach of death and that they are never free from the sense of death throughout their lives. The peacocks first fight, then mate and in the end die. The peacock symbol articulates Maya's agony and predicament: "The iterative symbolism of the peacock suggests Maya's struggle for life-in-death and death-in-life". (Sharma, 35)

Symbols: Maya and Gautama

Maya and Gautama, the major characters in the novel are steeped in symbolic association. Maya's name is symbolic and she is aware of it as "only a dream - an illusion". "Maya", my very name means nothing, is nothing, but an "illusion". (144) Her name also means worldly pleasures and temptations which will kill a person who comes in contact with them. So she dies in the end. Gautama dies due to his association with Maya. Maya stands for imagination and the dream world. She is the symbol of heart, loveliness and sensuousness; she symbolises the positive side of life with all its joys and beauties. Gautama on the other hand implies the negative side of life in the name of reality. Gautama stands for mind, logic and detachment. His name evokes the image of Gautama Buddha whose name suggests "detachment" and rejection of pleasures (Maya). Hence for Maya her husband Gautama:

... looked very much the mediator beneath the Bo tree, seated upon a soft tiger skin, too fastidious to touch the common earth, with those long, clean cut hands of his, too fastidious to admit such matters as love, with its accompanying horror of copulation of physical demands and even, overbearingly, spiritual demands of possession and rights won and established. (96)

Desai weaves a series of images into a cluster of symbols to express desperate and chaotic incidents into a pattern, providing richness and depth to the novel. The images are ornamental as well as functional which reflect the inner state of the characters.

Conclusion

The other characters in the novel also present the sad state of women in the society. Maya's friend Leela is another pathetic woman character in the novel, portrayed as a woman nursing a dying husband. But she accepts it as her fate and continues to live that way. Maya's childhood friend Pom was presented as a rebellious character in the beginning. She tried to rebel against her mother-in-law's arrogance and dominance but she succumbed to her supremacy at the end. Desai has deftly delineated the neurotic self of Maya in the show-down battling with the pangs of alienation, for emancipation, by a dexterous array of piebald images and symbols. In short to sum her character in the words of Gopal: "Maya stands as a victim of the constant tension between the vain glory of city life and regressive tendency to recapture the childhood world of innocence and purity". (20) The isolation and expectation of Maya only echoes the psyche of Indian women in general. Indian Women feel that they are uprooted from the family where they were born, in the name of marriage. Their existential struggle in the in-laws' house consumes their freedom. The thought of emancipation forces them to linger into childhood memories and subsequently intensifies their alienation. Maya succumbs to that alienation as she feels that all the routes for emancipation are closed to a childless wife in India.

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